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CHT surging into the development mainstream -- people first

Rangamati: People and institutions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts will begin to shape their own development—from the 'bottom up'—in a new era of development initiative and international donor support, UN Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative, Jorgen Lissner, said during an inaugural ceremony in Rangamati earlier today.

"Through a partnership of Government, NGOs and the donor community, UNDP will facilitate self-reliant approaches to development that the people and institutions of the CHT have defined for themselves. It will be based on their empowerment to take charge of local community-driven development planning and implementation. We will work to strengthen their capacities and support their small projects widely across the Hill Tracts. Our common goal is to build confidence and to turn the peace initiatives into development realities that will reduce poverty and benefit the people," Mr. Lissner said.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, conflict over the past three decades has inhibited development, but people are now on the threshold of reaping new development opportunities. Earlier today, local communities, national Government, international Donors and UNDP officially re-started their development activities in the region, which had ground to a halt two years ago due to security concerns.

During a traditional ceremony in the region's centre, Rangamati, the Honorable Chairman of the CHT Regional Council, Mr. Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma and the Honorable Deputy Minister of the Ministry of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Mr. Moni Swapan Dewan, inaugurated the new Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility office. More than 200 guests, including Dhaka-based Members of Parliament, ambassadors, local leaders, and community representatives, were there to mark the opening of the office -- which will be the hub of a new Government/UNDP/ Donor project titled, 'Promotion of Development and Confidence Building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts'.

Most development activities ground to a halt or were scaled down in the Chittagong Hill Tracts two years ago after three foreign engineers working on a Danish funded project were kidnapped. In August 2002, UNDP coordinated a joint Government and Donor mission to assess the security situation and development prospects in the region.

The assessment team concluded it was safe for development workers to return, and that development needs of the people had reached a critical level, as tensions had robbed the area of consistent development support for the past 25 years. Today, more than 40 percent of the population is unemployed, while only 30 percent live above the



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national poverty line, and 50 percent of children drop out of school sometime during their primary education. Infrastructure, such as roads and health facilities, have deteriorated almost beyond use, while other such facilities have already been abandoned.

“Everybody involved felt there were clear and strong concerns that development must restart and be focused on reducing poverty, with local people in the driver’s seat,” said Dr. Manik Lal Dewan, Chairman of the Rangamati Hill District Council.

The new project was formulated in response to these urgent needs. With the overall aim of reducing poverty, especially among the very poor, the project is designed to consolidate peace by helping local institutions to function more effectively and spearhead regional progress. In addition, 500 communities – some of which are located many days hike from urban areas in the deep jungle -- will be supported to undertake small-scale health, infrastructure, and employment projects that are conceived and managed locally.

“Communities know best about their problems, development needs and solutions, and once empowered in terms of organizational, technical and financial capabilities, they will provide the most effective means for realizing both peace-building and development opportunities.” said Michael Heyn, Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility Director.

Under the project a multi-donor ‘Quick Impact Fund’ (QIF) has been established. Local institutions and communities will be able to draw on the fund to finance their development initiatives. An average of Tk. 300,000 will be provided per initiative. Already the Governments of Australia and the United States of America have committed resources towards the fund. Initially the project is designed to run one year with the intention of providing quick impact development assistance, and to lay the foundation for a more extensive and long-term joint Government and multi-donor development support programme in the future.

“The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs values this new partnership with the international donor community, and looks forward to continuing close collaboration with UNDP and other partners, to bring new hope and to sustain a truly people-centred approach to development. This is our best chance to build confidence and to consolidate peace in the Hill Tracts, ” concluded Deputy Minister, Moni Swapan Dewan at the inaugural ceremony.

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